

UCC Conference Disaster Coordinators Network: A History 2000-2021



Stronger together!

That could be the slogan for the United Church of Christ Disaster Conference Coordinators (CDC) network, which celebrated its 20th anniversary via Zoom in July 2021.

The network was built on a firm foundation of UCC conferences' and congregations' long-time generous response to disasters – whether with funds or work teams. It seeks to resource UCC conferences and congregations on well-developed principles of disaster preparedness, planning, response and long-term recovery, to maximize the impact of their efforts.



Over the past 20 years, the CDCs have added value with training, coordination and peer support. They have supported countless long-term recovery groups (LTRGs) across the nation with seed grants and know-how.



They have helped raise funds and in-kind contributions for disaster recovery totaling many millions of dollars.

And they have helped recruit and deploy thousands of volunteers from their conferences and congregations to assemble CWS Clean-Up Buckets and other Kits and to repair and rebuild homes, whether on week-long work teams or for several months as Partners in Service. (Pictured: just some of

the network's participants and promoters; volunteer coordinators; Cleanup buckets.)



Here's how UCC disaster response worked in the 1990s.

When a conference suffered a disaster within its boundaries, national setting staffer Linda Petrucelli (*pictured, right*) – then point person for both disaster response and One Great Hour of

Sharing (OGHS) – worked with the conference minister to assess needs.

She also helped match congregational and conference work teams with rebuilding efforts across the United States following major disasters – for example, Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Financial support for disaster response came from One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS).

Still, Petrucelli hoped for a more concentrated response from the UCC national setting, and for a national network of Conference Disaster Coordinators. That happened in the UCC's 2000 restructure. In summer 2000, Florence Coppola (*pictured, center*) was hired as Executive for the new National Disaster Ministries, working with Susan Sanders (*pictured, left*), the OGHS Team Leader who also was hired under the restructure.



At the national setting, a UCC working group developed program details, including a goal to recruit one to two CDCs per conference. Conference ministers gave their feedback, then final approval at their early 2001 annual meeting.

An early goal, Coppola said, was a “disaster preparedness plan for every conference.” National staff offered to help work with conference committees to prepare their plans, and offered \$5,000 grants in support. (*Pictured, Southern Illinois CDC Howard Self, left, with a work team and homeowner, center*)

Conferences Seed Disaster Ministries' Development



Development of UCC National Disaster Ministries and the CDC network did not take place in a vacuum – not at all. A similar vision had taken root in several conferences. Their vision informed national setting developments.



For example, a personal experience spurred UCC Ohio Conference Minister Ralph Quellhorst (*pictured, left*) to initiate disaster ministries and a disaster response plan in that conference in 1992. Here's how Quellhorst's then colleague Bill Wealand tells the story.

Ralph and his wife Sue were visiting a church member when a tornado ripped through the area. They had left their two daughters at home with a babysitter. As soon as it was safe to do so, the panicked parents jumped in their car and headed home. They could see from a distance that their parsonage had been flattened.

Thankfully, the babysitter had known to take the children to the basement, and all three were unhurt physically. Still, the experience traumatized the family emotionally. The experience brought home to Quellhorst the importance of disaster preparedness and recovery planning.

"One of the ways Ralph dealt with the trauma was to start disaster ministries in the Ohio Conference," Wealand said. Quellhorst enlisted Wealand for that task, soon looping in Jim Ditzler (*at right in the picture, celebrating restoration of a family's private bridge*).



Their training and planning sessions in 1998-1999 helped shape the new National Disaster Ministries.

“Jim Ditzler is the volunteer who believed that other people would want to volunteer for disaster response and helped persuade UCC leaders this model would work,” said Lesli Remaly, now UCC Minister for Disaster Response and Recovery.



Here's another example of UCC conference leadership in disaster ministries. In the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, Mary Anna Speller took CWS training in 1997, then led the conference in responding to smaller disaster events.



Speller (*pictured, left*), John Gantt and Phil Hoy decided a plan was needed for disaster and social justice relief. IKC Minister Stephen Gray appointed Speller the conference's first disaster coordinator.

The UCC national setting grant was “an incentive,” Speller said, and the first IKC disaster plan was written in February 2002. A Conference Disaster Preparedness and Response Ministry Team officially was formed.

At a first gathering of the newly forming national network in October 2000, 23 people from 15 conferences were present. In 2003, 22 of the UCC's 39 conferences had coordinators (44 people), and 19 conferences had a disaster preparedness and response plan, with six in process. The Conferences of the UCC Insurance Board also had a coordinator in the network. (*Pictured above, an early meeting of CDCs; Speller; a snapshot of a local recovery effort.*)

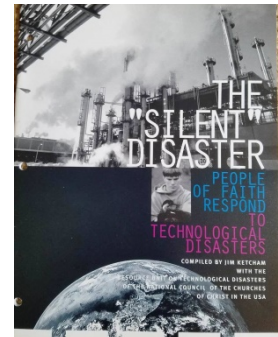


Milestones

The first National Disaster Preparedness and Response Training was held in Hawaii in 2001, by invitation of FEMA VAL Marilyn Shigetani, a UCC member.

Training in meeting needs for emotional and spiritual care was offered in several eastern U.S. conferences in late 2001, in the wake of the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The first Technological Disaster Response Training was held in Florida in 2001 with support from the UCC Florida Conference, where Alan Coe was CDC. By May 2003, five training sessions had been held, with a total 145 participants. Tech disaster training was in partnership with Church World Service and staff member Joann Hale.



A CDC with particular interest and expertise in technological disasters was Will Best, then UCC Kansas-Oklahoma Conference Disaster Response Coordinator. In 2004, he helped call to the faith community's attention the lead and zinc poisoning disaster in Tar Creek, Okla., and to seek redress for the victims.

In 2005, UCC Florida Conference Disaster Coordinator Alan Coe was hired to staff Hurricane Katrina response, and a huge recovery program began in which UCC National Disaster Ministries was key to setting up the response.



From the early 2000s, UCC conference disaster response groups developed rapport with those of other denominations, Wealand said. "The partnerships we formed brought a sense of the wider church's ability to collaborate and do significant things." The ecumenical "Community Arise" disaster recovery curriculum was

among fruits of this collaboration. *(Pictured: meeting with a long-term recovery group.)*

CDCs' Role Today

Here's how the role of Conference Disaster Coordinators is described today:



A Conference Disaster Coordinator is appointed by the conference to serve as a primary point of contact and team leader for a Conference Disaster Team (CDT). Their primary responsibility is to develop and lead a CDT to assist the conference and congregations to prepare for disasters and – when disasters occur – to educate local UCC leadership, donors and supporters of needs, disseminate information and recruit and deploy volunteers for long-term recovery work.

The role of Conference Disaster Coordinator is voluntary. Some CDCs are retired, and some have full-time jobs. CDCs act as a liaison between the CDT, the conference and UCC Disaster Ministries. They are the backbone of UCC Disaster Ministries' domestic preparedness and long-term recovery efforts.

They share leadership with UCC Disaster Ministries as representatives on National VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) and UCC Disaster Ministries committees, such as the current Tool Trailer and Emotional and Spiritual Care working groups. *(The latter also includes the Rev. Martha Jacobs, right.)*



By maintaining relationships with UCC Disaster Ministries and with state and local disaster response entities, both governmental and private sector, including state and local VOADs, they are able to appropriately focus the resources of the ministry (financial, volunteer, time and energy) on preparedness and long-term recovery efforts.



A groundbreaking for affordable housing in AZ for victims of the Alameda fire. **The Central Pacific Conference donated \$11,300 towards the project.**

Edited by Carol Fouke-Mpoyo. Thanks to the following for sourcing and/or reviewing this “history” – Alan Coe, Joshua Baird, Florence Coppola, Jim Ditzler, Craig Hoffman, Indiana-Kentucky Conference, Lesli Remaly, Phyllis Richards, Mary Anna Speller, Bill Wealand. Additional information from the OGHS March 2004 Newsletter, & ucc.org/disaster_index/disaster_conference_disaster_coordinators, which includes a link to a directory of current Conference Disaster Coordinators.

July 2021

